

THE MIDDLE EAST FESTIVAL OF SPIRITUALITY & PEACE 2007

VIEWS OF SUBUD MEMBERS

Written and Compiled by Lee Gershuny with Contributions from
Karolina Prins, Graham Dickson and Amalia Rasheed

Lee Gershuny: I have participated in and contributed to all the MESP Festival programmes since its inception in 2004 by facilitating workshops, presenting performances and this year, as part of the Edinburgh SUBUD team, helping co-ordinate the visit of the SUBUD international team and the hosted meal at the end of the Festival. It is actually at the first SUBUD hosted meal during the Festival that I became acquainted with SUBUD and was later opened at the World Congress in Innsbruck in 2005.

I have found each MESP programme an inspiring learning process, resonant with my commitment to making a culture of peace a sustainable work-in-progress and experiencing a sense of community with the diverse voices I encountered. Thanks to the vision and commitment of its directors, Neill Walker and the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities and Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning (EIAL), that experience operates on all levels not only during the Festival, but also throughout the year -- from discussions with Neill Walker about workshop design, programme suggestions, publicity, possible venues, administration, accommodation, letters supporting funding applications, etc. to his being present and sometimes participating in the workshops. Neill Walker's support is comprehensive, beginning soon after the previous Festival ends and always inspired by peacemaking and community building .

The 2007 MESP Festival seemed to clarify even more than past programmes, its role as a vehicle for local, national and international community building between diverse spiritual traditions, cultures and religions and between the internal and external experiences of the individual.

This report is meant to give you an idea of the kinds of events and the diversity of experience at the MESP as well as our impressions, thoughts and experiences.

CREATING A CULTURE OF PEACE WITHIN AND OUTWITH THE MESP

SUBUD Hosted Meal: Working with Daniel Smith and Graham Dickson from Edinburgh SUBUD in organising the event was in itself a community building process that included consultations with each other, members of the Scotland Region, Amalia Rasheed of the International Group, the potential venues and caterers, our funders (Scottish Community Foundation), and Neill Walker, Co-Director of the MESP. This process started right after the Edinburgh SUBUD AGM in early spring of 2006 and lasted until the end of the Festival at the meal itself.

Graham Dickson's experience of the Hosted Meal: "The object was to provide an opportunity for the 'temporary community' of those who had taken part in this Festival of Spirituality and Peace to meet and reflect together on their shared experiences and this was achieved. The nature of the event meant that we did not

know who would come and actually most of the principal speakers had already left. Despite a wet night about 35 people came and many were reluctant to leave. The atmosphere was very open, people moved between groups, new friendships were made and old ones renewed, and the visitors will take the spirit of the Festival back to their own communities.

A grant from the Scottish Community Foundation, for which we were obviously very grateful, contributed to the hire of the attractive and appropriate central venue and the cost of the light vegetarian meal, and, indirectly, to a very successful venture. So much so that one of the Festival directors who was with us has decided to repeat the event next year and to consider having a welcome meal at the Festival opening.

This effort by the local group, with some support also from the Scottish region, was a service to the community, and not in any way to promote Subud. Nevertheless several people showed an interest and may join in due course.”

Karolina Prins Visit to the MESP: Upon the recommendation of Amalia Rasheed, Karolina decided to participate in the workshop I designed and facilitated, “Tapping the Wisdom of the Group.” This required her arriving in Edinburgh several days before the arrival of other members of the international team -- Amalia and Samuel – and the Festival Conference. Bearing in mind the inclusive ethos of the Festival and the focus on community building, I arranged accommodation for her at the home of one of our members, Daniella Shippey, whose handicap prevented her from attending any events without transport. Karolina was a generous guest, and participated in the spiritual exercise of Subud with other female members in her hostess’s flat.

Getting to know her was a joy and being with her a warm, relaxed experience. Her participation in my workshop was wholehearted as she demonstrated her compassion and ability to connect to the Source on several occasions.

Karolina’s Comments on “Tapping the Wisdom of the Group:” “Fortunately, before offering my part in the conference, I had the chance to attend the one day workshop of Subud member Lee Gershuny from Edinburgh called ‘Tapping the wisdom of the Group’. Lee provided practical tools in a supportive, caring, non-judgemental environment in which we engaged in interactive exercises thinking, feeling and sharing about our awareness of wisdom relating to the basic elements of peacemaking and community building. Important elements were:

Welcoming (hospitality, appreciation, rituals)

Respect/celebrating differences, Acceptance/ understanding and allowing space

Openness of heart and mind, Trust, Listening and awareness of each other

Skills or tools of peacemaking in a humane way, letting go, challenging change etc...

My personal experience was not of discovering something really new but in the sense of amazement at how Lee facilitated with such love and attention, enabling us to

experience our own and each other's wisdom, showing clarity at a deep level of how living a culture of peace can work.”

Karolina's Workshop at the MESP Conference: I participated in her workshop and found it one of the best at the conference informed by her humility and ability to invite everyone in a small all female group to speak for themselves. Karolina's report of her experience reflects her own inner warmth and light:

“Subud was invited to participate and share in the Two-day International Conference: Spirituality and Community in Edinburgh and to offer an one hour Workshop titled: ‘Our unique Soul and Love in community: sharing experiences in Subud and a sharing spiritual practice 20 minute session, both relating to peace and community and spirituality.

In the wonderful colourful ambience of different cultures and religions women and men, well-known speakers shared about their knowledge, understanding and views of Islam, Hebrew, Christianity, Bahai, Sufi. Enjoying Taize singing dancing listening to Turkish, Armenian, Iranian musicians etc., I was honoured and challenged to share in this inspiring atmosphere to a little audience about the meaning of Subud and our spiritual exercise, the latihan as experienced in Subud by a community of many religious, spiritual, cultural or ethnic communities.”

The MESP Conference - Karolina Prins: “The conference was towards the end of what had been about six weeks of a festival with many different activities. Welcomed by the open atmosphere during this conference, despite my insecurity I could face the challenge to stand for my belief in giving this little presentation and workshop. As I increasingly was able to connect strongly with my inner knowing that deep inside, guided by the Power of the Great Life Force, I could trust and offer what was needed at that moment. I tried to give a glimpse of my understanding and feeling I experienced in Subud to experience with the participants in relation to the given context.

In the workshop, I invited the people to prepare a quiet space within as free as possible from the heart and mind, which truly trusts that deep inside, in our unique soul, there is the knowledge of a right way towards meeting each other in love and peace; thus allowing the possibility for grace to provide insight to questions relating to peace and community, families, our work environments etc....

Based on the understanding that peace begins within ourselves, we sought inner guidance on how to live in peace within ourselves and hence in our communities. We asked ourselves: What is peace for me at this time, how to live in peace within ourselves, how to open my heart for peace to myself, how to put the potential into practice. Between the questions we took time to allow ourselves to feel what was coming up and to share the results. Participants shared very openly and were all happily surprised and the people as well how easily response came to the questions in silence gaining insight by trusting and inviting grace and universal wisdom.

I am very grateful for all those heart-warming inspiring experiences during the Edinburgh Conference feeling united with the Edinburgh Subud group.

Feeling united and embraced by the spirit of the melting pot of all these interesting manifestations of so many different cultures and religions in this Edinburgh Festival I felt invited to listen with an open mind and open heart. Thank you with all my heart.”

Amalia Rasheed: Voices from different faiths contributed good food for thought at the conference: The Sikh’s idea of practising love by sharing community life beyond ones own religious group, the Ismaili Muslim’s call for more respect, the Bahai’s approach towards working for unity through their open house for worship and activities with youth in the wider community, reminded me of Tariq Ramadan’s words the previous year, saying that both knowing oneself and each other were key elements towards peace. Chief Rabbi David Rosen of Jerusalem pointedly illustrated that that the Middle Eastern conflict is not a religious but a political struggle for ownership of territory and that only when faced with insecurity and fear for loss of basic human rights do people turn to religion to strengthen their identity which then gets misused in politics to fuel conflict. He shared the news of his endeavours to bring religious leaders of the various communities together to form a council which is now being supported by political powers, in the belief that if religion should stop being part of the problem it should be made part of the solution. This he felt was missing in the Oslo peace talks which ended with the famous handshake on the white house lawn between political representatives of the conflicting sides, which did not represent what had become the religious identities of peoples that still felt threatened.

The bottom line which touched me as being common with all these peacemakers, came through clearly in Sister Joan Chittister’s talk illustrating the ingredients needed in humility. One being that if you are in touch with the source and your true essence, you can be treated in the lowest possible way, and will not be vulnerable. You will not be one of those whose identity can be misused towards conflict, but rather one who can brave any storm and eventually contribute towards peace in smaller and larger communities.

Other Highlights from the MESP - Graham Dickson: “Several things remain with me from the experience of the few events I managed to get to this time.

First, and as before, was the image from particle physics of the charged particle which is itself invisible but which manifests its presence by the effects it has on other, traceable, particles. Here were people from far and near clearly touched by the spirit and showing it in many different ways.

Second, I was helped to understand, and accept, something of what “ineffable” means: too great to be expressed in words. Please accept the inadequacy of my words.

Third, the inspiration of an Orthodox monk, a hermit even, from a Shropshire hillside. He spoke of the “voice” from the burning bush saying only I AM - not I am someone or something, no qualities, no attributes, no predicates, just I AM. This I AM is at the centre, is the centre; creation is just “off-centre” and mankind can be aware of this. Our response to the centre, reached in solitude, may be a form of communion, and may differ from another’s response. We may join in another kind of communion with others whose responses, equally strong and heartfelt, may be different and worthy of

respect. Here are this year's Festival theme of spirituality and community and the continuing Festival themes of Spirituality and Peace.

We are to remember that '...the burning bush is still burning...'

Fourth, during an evening panel discussion, the ringing assertion by a local rabbi that scriptures can and should be a basis for mutual understanding and peace between faiths rather division if not enmity, using Jerusalem as a prime example. If only this could be realised by politicians. It reminded us that there are many people in the Middle East who are working hard for peace between Arabs and Israelis, some of whom had taken part in MESP in previous years, achieving much but without recognition.

Lee Gershuny: This year I was once again an active contributor to several MESP events, including facilitating 2 workshops: "Turning Points and Epiphanies: Connecting to the Source in the Midst of Conflict" and, as mentioned before, "Tapping the Wisdom of the Group;" a short performance poetry piece I wrote for the MESP One World Peace Concert, "Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control," accompanied by a part Chinese dancer, an Iraqi musician, Israeli choreographer and Scottish director; and 2 performances of a new drama I wrote, *Headless in Eden: A Scene from the Café of No Tomorrows*, presented by The Elements World Theatre's multi-talented ensemble of actor/musicians.

Another treat for me was the final presentation of a work-in-progress, "Donkey" presented by dancers from Seven Doors and Ghazi Hussein, a Palestinian poet/playwright based in Edinburgh and the Arabian Night Celebration presented by Iraqi musician, Mohammed Nafea and his Babylon Band.

As an Edinburgh resident, I was fortunate to be able to attend many events marked as "Festival Highlights" including the Festival Lecture, "Spirituality and the Civilisation of Love" by Jean Vanier; the conference lecture by Rabbi David Rosen, conference "workshops" facilitated by Sister Joan Chittister and Rabbi David Rosen and most of the concerts by leading Middle Eastern musicians. In addition to his lecture to an audience of over 1,000, Jean Vanier facilitated a 3-day retreat in the city, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you," a meeting in a prison and another with young making contact with over 1,500 people in total. Jean Vanier not only spoke of love, but embodied it in his voice and presence. An extraordinary man!

The experience for many participants was intense and inspiring. I had the sense of being totally immersed in community with great thinkers, spiritual leaders and peacemakers. Even though some conference "workshops" were more like lectures than workshops, I found myself delighting at the nuggets of truth and eloquence I received. I particularly enjoyed Sister Chittister's discussion of "The 12 Degrees of Humility" originally meant for a brotherhood of monks during the Middle Ages.

Rabbi David Rose, from Edinburgh's Orthodox Synagogue, pointed out one of the most memorable facts for me at the "Multi Faith and Spiritual Forum on Spirituality and Community." In the Bible, God specifically told the Israelites that Jerusalem should be a city for all people!

As a resident in Edinburgh, I am privileged in having access to not only the MESP, but also related events and gatherings throughout the year, organised by Neill Walker and the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities (EICWS). For additional information, other participants' feedback, reviews, etc., please see: www.eicws.org